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Working Parents and the Rise of the ‘Family Friendly’ Private Sector in Britain

by Sarah Stoller¹

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Abstract: In the late 1980s, a number of Britain’s largest corporations began to trumpet their ‘family-friendliness’ and active support for women’s careers. Whereas in the late 1970s, the challenges facing working parents remained far from the agendas of most British businesses, in the course of only a decade, a sea change had taken place. Major British employers began to develop new policies and schemes that aimed to keep some, predominately white, middle class, and professional women workers with caring responsibilities in the paid workforce. Private companies now found themselves at the helm of devising what appeared, at first glance, to be the very progressive policies that feminists had long advocated. This paper considers what drove the rise of the ‘family friendly’ private sector, and suggests that far from resolving the challenges of working parenthood or transforming the gendered division of labor, ‘family friendly’ policies primarily served the interests of business. Working parents were left to resolve the tensions between paid work and caring responsibilities on their own in the context of ever more labor for British families.

In November 1991, NatWest Bank proudly announced the creation of a new employee self-help association for working parents in the pages of their staff newspaper *Bankground*. The group, initiated by London-based employees, was intended to provide an informal support network for working mothers and fathers that would offer advice on flexible hours, health care issues, maternity and paternity leave, and childcare provision. At a gathering of more than 100 staff to honor the creation of the new group, the General Manager of Group Personnel relayed the enthusiasm of NatWest’s board and equal opportunities division for the association.² A year later, in a public document intended to showcase the bank’s support for equal opportunities in the workplace, NatWest was happy to claim the group as evidence of their commitment to supporting the needs of workers with caring responsibilities.³ The Working Parents Association’s

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² “Working Parents Band Together to Make Their Busy Lives a Lot Easier,” *Bankground*, November 1991, NWB/132/21/15, National Westminster Bank.

³ “Opportunity 2000: First Year Progress Reports,” October 28, 1992, SA/EMP/1/19, Sainsbury’s.

internal minutes, however, told a different story. They suggested that NatWest offered only limited support to working parents in practice, and made clear the tensions that existed between the bank's self-identified working parents and its management. The degree to which NatWest's programs made a difference in the lives of their employees was an open question. What was clear was that the concerns of family life were now firmly on the agenda of one of Britain's largest employers.

In this paper I want to explore how and why family affairs entered British corporate workplaces in the early 1990s, and with what consequences. In the late 1980s, a prominent group of British employers began for the first time to compete for the loyalty of number of their employees, and in some cases, customers, on the basis of their alleged 'family friendliness.' Talk of family friendliness was staged around the figure of the 'working parent.' Although both women and men with children had long worked for pay, it was only from the 1980s that the previously little-used category of working parents entered into popular currency. In mid-century Britain, sociologists, public officials, and cultural commentators had evoked the figure of the 'working mother.'⁴ The language of working parents was now used along side this one, and increasingly displaced talk of working mothers in activism, social-scientific research, and policy.

The conversations about the challenges and rewards of 'working parenthood' that eventually materialized in corporate workplaces first coalesced in the context of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) in the 1970s. From the early 1970s, the crisis of profitability in British industry and the stagnation of wages increased the importance of women's paid work for businesses and households alike. As growing numbers of mothers entered the paid workforce,

⁴ On working motherhood in mid-century Britain, see: Helen McCarthy, "Women, Marriage and Paid Work in Post-war Britain," *Women's History Review*, 26: 1, 2016, pp. 46-61.

cuts to the welfare state also meant that greater responsibilities fell on private families. It was in this context that new feminist critiques of work and family took shape. Activists advocated for women's equality in paid work and championed the need for more institutional support for workers with caring responsibilities. They also sought to remake the division of labor in households, in part by reimagining the social place of caring around a new notion of parenthood as a genderless category of identity.

Amidst the dwindling resources for feminist activism in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a subset of feminists channeled their work into charitable organizations that advocated for the concerns of working parents. These included New Ways to Work and the Working Mother's Association – known as Parents at Work from 1994 – as well as the Daycare Trust, and the Maternity Alliance, among others. From these institutional footholds, activists continued to press for greater support for workers with caring responsibilities even as they made compromises to attract financial backing. The concerns of working parents also gained traction in unions and in public sector employment policy by the early 1980s, as feminists turned to the broader political left and to local government as the organized women's liberation movement came apart. The policies developed in unions and in some parts of the public sector in these years followed the lead of feminist campaigners in imagining community-based and collective solutions to the challenges of childcare and rigid work hours.

The path that the 'working parent' took into the corporate sector was both varied and circuitous. In the early 1980s, feminist academics with American research funding based at the LSE managed to put affirmative action for women employees on the agenda at NatWest for the first time. Much of their work had to do with challenging the assumption that women were not

interested in careers, and highlighting women's unique needs as workers. At their behest, in 1981, NatWest instituted the first formal re-entry scheme in the country for mid-level or higher staff who had previously left the bank. They also introduced the first corporate training course for women managers in Britain, one of the first gender target-setting exercises, and one of the earliest manager-level equal opportunities positions in the country. As they did so in the context of a new legal framework for women's rights from the 1970s, the bank also began to shape a 'business case' for equal opportunities. It was becoming clear at NatWest that cultivating women workers at the managerial level could have important financial advantages.

It was not until the late 1980s, however, that the 'business case' gained adherents across the commercial world, and became closely centred on the figure of the working parent. From the late 1980s, reports about declining numbers of school leavers emerging from the Department of Employment and from Warwick University's Institute for Employment Research raised new alarm about the future labor supply.⁵ An anticipated 20% fall in the number of young people leaving schools and colleges, and a corollary rise in the number of young people entering higher education and delaying their participation in the labor market indicated that businesses would need to rely more than ever on women's work in the 1990s.⁶ These forecasts were of particular concern to large companies, especially those in the growing British service industry. What was soon referred to in business, activism, and the media alike as the "demographic time bomb," paved the way for corporate engagement with the concerns of working women on an unprecedented scale.

⁵ See: Business in the Community, "Opportunity 2000: Information Pack," September 1993, SA/EMP/1/19, Sainsbury's.

⁶ John Adshead, "Developing a New Human Resource Strategy for Tomorrow's Society," 1989, SA/EMP/4, Sainsbury's.

Companies including Boots and Sainsbury's, Barclay's and IBM began to introduce policies such as flexible work hours, job sharing, parental leave, and childcare support that had long been demands of feminist activists. Anxiety about the demographic time bomb also created new opportunities for the charities concerned with working parents and women's work. By 1992, 150 British companies covering 23% of the British workforce had signed on to the "Opportunity 2000" campaign orchestrated by the corporate social responsibility charity Business in the Community. The scheme's aim was to "maximize the potential of women in the workforce," a goal strongly in keeping with new the new demographic and economic pressures confronting businesses.

As the need to recruit and retain skilled women staff became paramount, however, it was not as though corporations wholeheartedly embraced longstanding activist demands. Increasing awareness within business of the relationship between women's caring responsibilities and their position in the workplace was accompanied by an unwillingness to adopt an explicitly feminist agenda. Writing about the evolving policies of the recently privatized British Petroleum (BP) Exploration company in 1991, Penelope King wrote that the company was "keen to promote women whilst not positively discriminating in favour of women."⁷ This reluctance was apparent above all in the language adopted alongside the embrace of new employment policies. Policies intended specifically to alleviate the challenges faced by working mothers and to attract and retain women staff were introduced increasingly on behalf of working parents and in the name of 'family friendly' workplaces.

⁷ Penelope King, "Dear Lucy," July 29, 1991, 6PAW/20, The Women's Library, London School of Economics (hereafter TWL@LSE).

From the outset, the idea of a genderless working parent articulated by feminists had contained important ambiguities. On the one hand, it had the radical potential to identify men as much as women as responsible for the affective lives of households. At the same time, however, it could easily render invisible existing inequalities in the division of caring work. Whereas in some public sector workplaces in the early 1980s, new employment policies for those with caring responsibilities were introduced with both women and men in mind, in the commercial world the language of working parent tended more often to obscure the real intention of new policies. At NatWest, for instance, the re-entry scheme, which was initially envisioned to apply to women who'd taken maternity leave and in practice applied exclusively to this demographic, was nonetheless instituted in the name of all staff. Transforming the gendered division of labor was not on the minds of British executives, even as they began to respond to some of the long-standing demands of feminists.

What I'm trying to suggest is that in the late 1980s, the family entered British corporate workplaces as part of a post-feminist consensus. Family friendliness and the emerging idea of 'work-life balance' rather than the gendered division of labor became the *raison d'être* for new flexible work and childcare policies, with long-term consequences. The 1970s feminist vision underscoring pressure for policies in support of working parents was abandoned in the rhetoric of these new corporate schemes even before it was lost in the realities of limited commitment in practice.

The realities of shifting corporate practice were indeed mixed, as the employees who sought to make use of new policies were soon to find. By the first anniversary of Opportunity 2000's launch, 83% of Opportunity 2000 members offered job sharing to some staff compared to

only 54% a year earlier, 60% offered maternity packages better than the statutory minimum, and 67% provided paternity leave for which there was no legal requirement.⁸ That these new policies had consequences for the lives of some workers was evident in the statistics regarding maternity returners. In 1993, Boots reported that one in three women employees now returned to work following maternity leave, compared to just 7% in 1990. Through a new job sharing scheme and the introduction of flexible working practices, Barclay's had likewise seen their maternity return rate double to almost 80% in a period of 4 years.⁹ Despite some indications of progress, many of these policies applied only to some, managerial level staff. Moreover, they depended on the support of middle management and in most organizations the pace of change in attitudes was slow. In a December 1992 report on the progress of the campaign, *The Independent* noted that members had largely "failed to communicate... objectives to staff, and only a quarter of them have allocated a budget for achieving published goals."¹⁰ Publicity was outpacing policy.

Workers nonetheless sought to navigate and make use of new policies in all kinds of ways. Even as they lost the language of working parents to corporate schemes as a way of pressing for real shifts in the gender division of labor, they continued to evoke the rhetoric family friendliness and even work-life balance to point out the gaps between the promise of new policy and reality. This was true of some working class parents as well as middle class ones around whom policies were shaped. At a July 1991 meeting of the NatWest Working Parents association, which featured a Q&A session with personnel managers, one man told the

⁸ Business in the Community, "Opportunity 2000: First Year Progress Reports," October 28, 1992, SA/EMP/1/19, Sainsbury's.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Judy Jones, "Equality Campaign for Women Falters," *The Independent*, December 28, 1992, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/equality-campaign-for-women-falters-1565691.html>.

assembled group “As a Manager applying for a 3 month unpaid paternity leave, I found the attitude of Senior Management a problem.” The personnel team in attendance cautioned patience, noting that “attitudes are beginning to change.” Other attendees complained about an absence of adequate information about new policies, and problems with finding posts for maternity returners. “It seems,” one woman said, “that although the policy is there, it is not always put into practice.”¹¹ Of course, few organizations had done as much to change employment policies as NatWest. As one mother who wrote in to the charity Parents at Work in the early 1990s pointed out, the concept of workplace support for parents remained for most “just a faraway dream.”¹²

Increasingly, as workers continued to push organizations for changes in policy through the language of working parenthood, it also became a way in which individuals narrated their everyday lives. This was particularly the case when it came to experiences of guilt, stress, and fatigue. It was at the juncture between workers’ embrace of the identity of the working parent and corporate financial interests that the notion of working parenthood began to align with a new politics quite distant from its feminist roots. At the Glaxo Group Research division of the pharmaceutical company Glaxo Smith Klein in the early 1990s, a parents support group much like NatWest’s advertised itself to fellow staff as follows: “Are you tired, confused, stressed and have just returned to work after having your baby? Would you like to talk to others who are working parents and know what you are feeling?”¹³ While staff self help groups for working parents predominately attracted women staff, employees were happy to follow the lead of

¹¹ “Working Parents Association Meeting,” July 15, 1991, NWB/872/3/5, National Westminster Bank.

¹² Gillian Milne to Rae Lawrence, “The Working Mother’s Thank You Award Nomination: Joyce Bennett,” October 12, 1992, 6PAW/1, TWL @LSE.

¹³ Slava Budin-Jones, “Parents’ Support Network,” 1994, 6PAW/18, TWL @LSE.

companies and charities alike in adopting the gender neutral language of parenting. This was staff organizing that management was more than happy to encourage; after all, a self-help culture was far less costly to organizations than a more confrontational one.

As companies embraced the constitution of new self-help groups for working parents, in some cases they also became the purveyors of self-help literature for employees – lauding the benefits of a rigorously well-managed and balanced life. An early 1990s guide entitled “Checks & Balances: A Busy Woman’s Guide to Managing Home and Work,” published by Midland Bank adopted all of the style of a women’s magazine. First, the guide resorted to tried and tested essentialism, telling readers “Most women are good organizers. We have to be.” It went on to ask readers to evaluate “Are you getting the balance right? To determine your state of balance at present, tick the boxes next to the statements that seem to apply to you.” The quiz was followed by a list of possible people “who can support you.” These included colleagues and friends, but made no mention of partners, bosses, or employers. Succeeding as a working parent, Midland suggested, was a matter of individual determination and fortitude, not employer concessions.

In practice, the ‘family friendly’ policies that emerged in Britain in the early 1990s were about providing advice, and less often actual assistance, to individual, generally managerial employees. Rarely did they provide genuinely collective solutions such as on site childcare for staff, though Midland was a notable exception in this respect. Instead, talk of parents and of family, along with ‘work life balance’ became mechanisms for the individuation of the challenges of managing paid work alongside caring responsibilities. Companies promoted flexible working schemes and childcare vouchers in the same breath as they championed exercise and breathing exercises as tools for individuals hoping to navigate the demands of work

and home alike. In the early 1990s, feminist charities such as Parents at Work sought to draw attention to the ongoing challenges facing workers with caring responsibilities through competitions for employer, working mother, and childcare provider of the year. In practice, these competitions only contributed to an emerging corporate culture that celebrated the heroics of the individual who successfully navigated the day-to-day despite myriad obstacles.

No sooner were policies that appeared to deliver on the demands of feminism introduced as they were resignified as part of a new corporate interest in the affective lives of workers. Over the course of the 1990s, the relationship between large employers and their employees shifted, as companies began to acknowledge, albeit in limited ways, the pressures and strains on their staff. As early as the late 1980s, some forward-thinking personnel managers had a sense of the significance of the change to come. In a 1989 strategic brief, John Adshead, the head of supermarket chain Sainsbury's Personnel Division remarked: "there can be no doubt that both potential and existing staff are increasingly aware of the value of non-monetary benefits and of the 'psychological contract' that exists between the two parties in employment." It is no coincidence that the early 1990s saw the growth of Employee Assistance Programs and other counselling resources as employment benefits in British organizations. Indeed, by the turn of the 21st century, these kinds of benefits had all but displaced the types of policies initially envisioned for the support of working parents. In 2003, an Equal Opportunities Commission study found that less than 10% of working fathers had access to a crèche, subsidized nursery place, or financial help with childcare in any form. Only 1 in 6 had received information about local

childcare provision from their employer. By contrast, more than half of fathers had access to workplace counselling or stress management advice.¹⁴

In her 1997 classic *The Time Bind*, sociologist Arlie Hochschild asked why employees were not taking advantage of the new ‘family friendly policies’ emerging in American corporate workplaces in large numbers. She concluded that by the 1990s, the roles of work and home had reversed – work had begun to offer a sense of community and belonging for employees while at the same time the home had become regimented and demanding. In the British context, and even the American, perhaps there were also other factors at work. First, new policies in support of working parents that existed in name did not always exist in practice. Second, in the 1990s work as much as home became a site of new anxieties – as the decade’s buzzword of “stress” and mounting concern about “long hours culture” would suggest. Moreover, ‘family friendly’ policies tended to reify both work and home as sites of relentless, competing demands. Whereas feminists had called for support for ‘working parents’ to liberate women both at work and at home, corporate policies that implicitly (and sometimes explicitly targeted women) lacked any vision of selfhood or community for women beyond the realms of work or home. Perhaps, then, the ultimate failure of new corporate policies was to offer something that felt like real help. The ultimate beneficiary, of course, was the market. Emerging pressures associated with middle-class dual-income households were resolved only through more paid labor – predominately on the part of working class, ethnic minority women. It was only a narrow subset of workers, then, who were able to meaningfully reshape their day-to-day lives in this new ‘family friendly’ world.

¹⁴ Margaret O’Brien and Ian Shemilt, “Working Fathers: Earning and Caring,” Women. Men. Different. Equal: Equal Opportunities Commission (University of East Anglia, 2003), 595/4/5/25, Warwick Modern Records Centre.

NOTES

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2. "Working Parents Band Together to Make Their Busy Lives a Lot Easier," *Bankground*, November 1991, NWB/132/21/15, National Westminster Bank.
3. "Opportunity 2000: First Year Progress Reports," October 28, 1992, SA/EMP/1/19, Sainsbury's.
4. On working motherhood in mid-century Britain, see: Helen McCarthy, "Women, Marriage and Paid Work in Post-war Britain," *Women's History Review*, 26: 1, 2016, pp. 46-61.
5. See: Business in the Community, "Opportunity 2000: Information Pack," September 1993, SA/EMP/1/19, Sainsbury's.
6. John Adshead, "Developing a New Human Resource Strategy for Tomorrow's Society," 1989, SA/EMP/4, Sainsbury's.
7. Penelope King, "Dear Lucy," July 29, 1991, 6PAW/20, The Women's Library, London School of Economics (hereafter TWL@LSE).
8. Business in the Community, "Opportunity 2000: First Year Progress Reports," October 28, 1992, SA/EMP/1/19, Sainsbury's.
9. Ibid.
10. Judy Jones, "Equality Campaign for Women Falters," *The Independent*, December 28, 1992, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/equality-campaign-for-women-falters-1565691.html>.
11. "Working Parents Association Meeting," July 15, 1991, NWB/872/3/5, National Westminster Bank.
12. Gillian Milne to Rae Lawrence, "The Working Mother's Thank You Award Nomination: Joyce Bennett," October 12, 1992, 6PAW/1, TWL @LSE.
13. Slava Budin-Jones, "Parents' Support Network," 1994, 6PAW/18, TWL @LSE.
14. Margaret O'Brien and Ian Shemilt, "Working Fathers: Earning and Caring," Women. Men. Different. Equal: Equal Opportunities Commission (University of East Anglia, 2003), 595/4/5/25, Warwick Modern Records Centre.